

# The Cultural, Spiritual, Psychological and Ethical Implications of Prayer in Therapy among the Igbo People in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** -Spirituality is becoming an increasingly important aspect of therapy, with prayer, mindfulness, forgiveness, compassion and other spiritual interventions being the choice for therapists. While the controversial nature of including prayer in therapy requires careful consideration of ethical issues, there is no doubt that within the African setting, prayer is used as an intervention in many therapy and mental health domains. Thus, the objective of this qualitative study was to address the cultural, spiritual and psychological implications of the use of prayer during therapy, its multicultural sensitivity, and values among the Igbo people in Nigeria. The study adopted a phenomenological design with a sample size of 15 respondents obtained using convenient sampling. The findings of the study reveal that prayer forms an integral component in the practice of therapy. Although prayer may not heal all physical or mental ailments, it can improve the quality of life and how a person sees his/her personal condition. The study therefore recommends that to improve the care of clients, therapists should develop a patient-centered, spiritually sensitive form of therapy in which religious issues are addressed gently and appropriately with dignity, respect, and integrity.

**Keywords:** Prayer, Culture, Spirituality, Psychology, Ethics, Therapy

## I. Background

Spirituality has increasingly become a consideration for mental health practitioners. As a result, spiritual interventions, including prayer, are now more frequently used in therapy (Weld & Eriksen, 2007a). The use of prayer in therapy can be transformational and promote psychological well-being, but it can be problematic and requires good supervision. Therapists do not feel free to explore their practice of prayer because of fear: of not being understood; of being judged; of losing respect and credibility; of being thought of as transgressing; of exposure by the supervisor; of how the supervisor will treat the disclosure; and of condemnation and dismissal of something that is important and precious to the counsellor (Gubi, 2007). The central implication for supervision is the need to create a culture of openness and a collaborative working alliance where all aspects of the counselling process can be explored with appropriate theoretical consideration and personal challenge, and where the supervisee feels accepted, able and open to exploring all aspects of the work with the supervisor. This prevents unethical practice, protects the client, and enables consistency of work.

In the United Kingdom, a study by Joshi et al., (2015) identified that non-medical influences on perception of mental ill-health treatment were more common. Since the UK has a diverse population, consisting of a wide range of spiritual and cultural beliefs, clinicians should strive to understand all different viewpoints in order to develop a better rapport with families. Also, using the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey (n = 1714), Levin (2016) investigated the prevalence and religious indicators of healing prayer use among adults in the United States. The survey included five indicators: (a) prayed for self (lifetime prevalence 78.8%); (b) prayed for others (87.4%); (c) asked for prayer (54.1%); (d) laying on of hands (26.1%); and (e) participated in a prayer group (53%).

However, prayer in an African society is regarded as a central point and the most revered custom in the society. It forms the community's bond, because it brings people together as one family, one community and one society under the supreme leadership and aid of the Supreme Being (God). Prayer acts as a channel of communication between the people and God or the gods. This channel has specific agents who aid in the work of communication and they are commonly known in many African communities as prophets, prophetess, priests, and priestess among other local names. These agents bring the community together to worship and communicate to their creator and also convey messages from the creator to the people (Singh & Bhagwan, 2020).

In South Africa, a study by van der Watt et al (2020) suggests that psychotherapists treat a wide range of health-related problems and culture-bound syndromes considered non-responsive to Western medicine with prayers. Participants described similar experiences regarding the three steps of becoming a traditional healer and treating clients with mental illness using herbs (90%), candles (82%), and prayer (78%). The majority of participants stated that they treated both mentally and physically ill clients; however, those participants who self-identified as spiritualists were more likely to report that they treated mental illness. Therefore, prayers become the focal point of the day-to-day life of the African people. This is clearly seen, because the communities' most

significant role was to create a good relationship with the Supreme Being for their survival. They therefore tend to bend their traditions in favor of the Supreme Being who governed their daily lives (Kanu, 2019).

Prayer is greatly seen as the guiding principle of each and every cultural practices that were done by the African traditional people. Prayer thus was the law and the norm of how the traditions were to be done. This is because in each and every African community, the gods were regarded as the source of life, the source of everything, and therefore, had the capacity to control our daily life and the only way to be in communion with them was to do what pertains to their commands.

Nigeria comprises of a variety of dissimilar cultural entities made up of more than 250 ethnic groups. The three key ethnic groups are Yoruba, Hausa/Fulanis and Igbo located in the southwest, north and southeast of Nigeria respectively. Each of the different ethnicities has its own indigenous ways of ensuring the health of its people (Asuzu et al., 2019). For this reason, an enduring method of healing or therapy in Nigeria is the alternative healthcare system, which is made up of the faith-based healers. In a study conducted by Onibokun & Adenipekun (2015) on the impact of cultural and religious beliefs on cancer patients in Nigeria, the result showed that a majority of the women believed they needed to combine prayers with medical treatment for cancer. This suggests that religious beliefs, particularly, prayer is an aspect that cannot be relegated when it comes to therapy, both physical and mental.

### Objective

The main objective of this study was to explore the different views of the therapists and clients who have been in therapy about the cultural, spiritual and psychological effects of prayer in therapy and counseling sessions among the Igbo people in Nigeria. The study also aimed at providing or opening a discussion path towards the use of prayer in therapy.

### II. Methodology

The qualitative phenomenological design was used in this study. With a convenient sampling technique, data was collected from 15 persons (i.e., 2 counsellors and 13 persons who have been in therapy) using a semi structured interview. The use of qualitative methods for this study facilitated the gathering of data of narratives related to culture and experiences of participants. Themes which emerged based on the recurrence of responses to semi-structured questions amongst the study participants were descriptively and thematically analyzed. The themes generated from the interviews were categorized in terms of the different aspects related to the topic which include:

1. The cultural worldview of the people pertaining to prayer
2. The spiritual implication of prayer as an intervention
3. Their stance on the psychological implication of prayer in therapy
4. The ethical dimension in the use of prayer during therapy

### III. Results

#### The Cultural Worldview of the People Pertaining to Prayer

The participants acknowledged that prayer spans beyond cultures. This means that the act and art of praying is universal irrespective of people's differing cultures. However, participants varied in their responses concerning the Igbo worldview pertaining to prayer with one of them saying that "the Igbo language for God- *Chukwu* suggests that there is one God who everyone prays to". Another participant quipped that "there are plurality of gods and these gods are beckoned to intercede on behalf of humans through different means". These views are in tandem with the general view among the Igbos that, in order to survive and prosper, certain social and supernatural powers must agree. Thus, prayers which signify social and supernatural powers are expressed in personal names formed with the noun '*chi*'.

Since culture also varies among the various communities in Igboland, there seems to be different understandings on the cultural implications of prayer among them. This is seen in the response of one participant;

I think prayer is not only confined to sacred places, but anywhere and at any time an individual feels the need to communicate with the divine being. In all cases the attitude is one of reverence and respect. While songs as means of prayer do not occur in all worships, especially at the daily and other private occasions, they are rendered mainly in public and annual events. Prayerful songs are usually accompanied by drumming, handclapping, dancing and merriment. In all these things the devotee expresses his joy before the divine being. The invocations and prayers reveal the names and attributes of God and the divinities (Participant 3, Interview on 4/11/2022).

A participant who claims to use prayer regardless of the situation in therapy puts it this way;

I could tell you many personal stories. People would come to me for therapy. I had a man who came with his family because he had lost everything into gambling. He was a native worshipper. I told his family to go but to just pray for us. During the therapy I felt like I was not in control. I know I can't be this good. I contribute it to the fact that people were praying for me (Participant 3, Interview on 6/11/2022).

There seems to be a high level of confidence and hope among the people when they pray. This is because of their belief in and sense of dependence on the divine beings to supply the needs of man and the fact of general relationship between God and men are made evident through prayer.

### **The Spiritual Implications of Prayer**

Prayer as an aspect of spirituality has the nature of communication between the divine and the human. Interviews with the participants showed that it was widely believed that prayer is more than a human action. This implies that prayer is perceived to be an interaction with a higher being. The participants in this study affirmed that there are spiritual implications to prayer within therapy. As one of the participants puts it;

...since prayer is the privilege of speaking, greeting and pleading to God, I believe that with sincerity in praying, I can communicate and relate to God correctly. So that it can solve all the problems that I am facing and the ones that will be faced (Participant 2, Interview on 5/11/2022).

Another participant spoke on prayer as a spiritual act in therapy thus;

I really feel that prayer as a spiritual discipline should be an essential part of therapy. Even the apostle James speaks regarding healing prayers. When I am sick or I feel alone, I usually take recourse to fervent prayers (Participant 3, Interview on 05/11/2022).

These responses indicate that prayer forms an integral component of some people's daily spiritual/religious ritual.

### **The Psychological Implications of Prayer**

Prayer can be considered an appropriate therapy intervention or in itself a therapy, as long as its soothing effect is felt by the client. Many people employ prayer to better their health and wellbeing. The study corroborates the statement from participant 2 that;

For me, prayer seems to offer an opportunity for a kind of intimacy between myself and the person I am trying to help. This especially helps the person to express love, forgiveness and affirmation. When I join hands during a prayerful moment, it often adds to the healing power of this important event (Participant 2, Interview on 4/11/2022).

In this study, all participants felt that prayers help to calm them. Religious practices like prayers represent the most prevalent complementary and alternative therapies all over the world. Especially in the Igbo cultural space, the impact of religion and local beliefs amongst people cannot be over looked. Though many people pray and believe it affects their health, scientific evidence is limited. In keeping with a general increase in interest in spirituality and complementary and alternative treatments, prayer has garnered attention among a growing number of behavioral scientists. Scientific studies demonstrate, and most patients confirm; that faith and involvement in religious healing activities can be helpful in preventing and treating illness, recovering from surgery, reducing pain; and improving quality of life. To improve the care of clients, therapists should develop a patient-centered, spiritually sensitive form of therapy in which religious issues are addressed gently and appropriately with dignity, respect, and integrity.

### **Prayer in Therapy: Ethical Dimensions**

All of the ethical codes provided by the associations that guide the profession of counseling require the use of informed consent (Egunjobi, 2021). In line with this ethical practice, a participant suggested that;

It is important to ascertain if a client identifies with a belief system in which prayer is a vehicle for expression. Clients should be asked in the assessment process about the nature of their spiritual beliefs. When considering incorporating prayer into therapy sessions, there is a question not only of the practitioner's comfort level but also the level of spiritual competence a practitioner may have in leading or facilitating the process (Participant 3, Interview on 3/11/2022).

It is essential to ethical practice that professional counselors provide their clients with the information needed to make good decisions. This is especially true for counselors and clients that contemplate the use of prayer in counseling. The ethical dimension in the use of prayer during therapy as seen in this study builds on to the thought proposed by Weld & Eriksen (2007b)

that when a counselor contemplates the use of prayer in counseling, it is an ethical imperative that the counselor engages in supervision or consultation with another professional counselor who has expertise in this area. Although therapists have noted an increase over the past two decades in emphasis on the assessment of spirituality and religiousness, there are only a few guidelines for supervision of counselors who choose to implement spiritual and religious techniques.

#### IV. Discussion

The use of prayer as an approach to therapy was reported by the participants. This includes its cultural, spiritual, psychological and ethical implications. Prayer is central to the value and philosophic systems of numerous individuals across various faiths and cultures (Silva & Delashmutt, 1999). This is why the integration of spiritual practices in therapy is a valuable tool for supporting and reinforcing change. Spirituality can be seen as the experiences and expressions of one's spirit in a unique and dynamic process reflecting faith in God or a supreme being; a connectedness with oneself, others, nature or God; and an integration of all human dimensions (Keisari et al., 2022). The results of this study also confirm the fact that prayer serves as a huge factor in therapy.

This paper explored the use of prayer in therapy. Participants who are counselors in this study confirmed that prayer as a spiritual intervention in therapy can be with or without a structure that can be easily co-constructed by clients and therapists. This spiritual intervention serves as a therapeutic means to help reinforce the externalization of a client's problem or help thicken alternative remedies (Rundio & Wong, 2022). While some counsellors find themselves praying before a client, others prefer to pray alone even before the client enters or more still, have a prayerful life (El-Nachef, 2021). Thus, therapists do not deny that the attitude of praying in some ways helps them to douse the tension in the therapy room.

The findings of this research corroborate the survey research done by Silva and Delashmutt (1999) which indicated that majority of clients believe in the healing power of personal prayer, furthermore, almost all of the clients admitted to therapists that they believe spiritual health is as important as physical and mental health, and more than half believe that health care providers should consider patients' spiritual needs as a part of their medical care. Additionally, the same study by Silva and Delashmutt (1999) found that about half of the participants reported using prayer to address health-related problems. As confirmed by half of the participants in this study, prayer deeply permeates all spheres of their lives as psychotherapists or clients and it cannot be distinguished from other aspects of their life.

#### V. Conclusion and Recommendation

Remarks from the findings show that Africans in general and Igbos in particular are notoriously religious people. Prayer plays a major role for people undergoing different stages in therapy. Spirituality may not extend life or heal physical ailments, but it can improve the quality of life and how a person sees his/her personal condition. The study also shows that prayer can be used as an available resource in psycho-therapeutic sessions. Sometimes, clients expect spiritual support from their therapists, counsellors, or professionals and may even complain that their spiritual needs are not adequately considered. The study therefore recommends that to improve the care of clients, therapists should develop a patient-centered, spiritually sensitive form of therapy in which religious issues are addressed gently and appropriately with dignity, respect, and integrity.

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